

**INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES TO J.  
CONRAD'S NOVELLA *HEART OF  
DARKNESS* IN F. F. COPPOLA'S FILM  
*APOCALYPSE NOW***

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**Abstract**

Intertextual references from *Heart of Darkness*, constantly reappear in the scenes of the film endowing new meanings over and over again. It is intertextuality that played main role in creating a different perspective of the Vietnam War as epitomized in the film *Apocalypse Now*. Intertextuality is an inalienable property of every text and will continue to be one for texts yet to be created. It is a continuous thread always knitting different patterns in the literary world. The film is a specific presentation of different characters involved in the story with strong intertextual references to Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. As a product of intertextuality it becomes another system of signs.

**Клучни зборови:** *intertextuality, text, film*

**Introduction**

The production of new meanings is often subject to intertextual references from books or other sources fused together. Intertextuality

as a theoretical notion was first introduced by the French post-structuralist theorist Julija Kristeva in her essay *Word, Dialogue and Novel* of 1969 on Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, and was soon spread across the Atlantic. The concept of intertextuality is that there is no real original text no matter how unique it might appear, but "every text is a synthesis of quotations". The role of the traditional concept of authorship is replaced by mutual intermingling of different texts, and their absorption one into another. The work of the author is made up of "anterior, rather than original quotations"<sup>1</sup>.

Both the writer when he creates the work, and the reader when he reads it, have certain background or schemata that allows them to create new meanings and decode them respectively. The schemata, or the background knowledge a person possesses on a certain subject, gives the reader the freedom to assign different meanings to the text. It is a creation of infinite string of new meanings emerging one out of another, though they might seem totally unrelated. In this way the text is created by both the writer and the reader.

It is intertextuality that creates variety in oral communication as well. The utterances we hear or utter every day are mere transpositions of other previously uttered by somebody somewhere. In written texts, the concept of intertextuality does not stand for the influences of one author over another, nor does it represent the sources of the literary work.

In this respect, as Kristeva claims, intertextuality is inherent to every text; one cannot determine the influences or the sources of any literary work, because those quotations are anonymous but already seen. This is very important because intertextuality mustn't be confused with the source of a certain literary work. Those\_anonymous quotations,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://elab.eserver.org/hfl0278.html>

particularly refer to everything the author has come across in their life. It is their personal lives, the social and political situation of their time, the history and all of the texts they have read in their lives that create these quotations. They are interwoven in their works always creating different meanings. Therefore, *Heart of Darkness* is by no means the source of *Apocalypse Now* but it serves as a generator of new meanings. Intertextuality is prolific and polysemic as it is a literary property of constant literary recurring. One (or more) systems of signs are transposed into another. Kristeva further claims that all texts are composed by means of other systems of signs rather than being a result of some familiar sources. The mutual transposition of those systems results in new interpretations and ideas.

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### **Intertextual references in the book and the film**

The film is a specific presentation of different characters involved in the story with strong intertextual references to Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. As a product of intertextuality it becomes another system of signs. The result is an endless production of new meanings in the film generated through transposition of texts into it form the novel. This proves that intertextuality does not serve as a source but presents a pile of anonymous quotations with creative power. Intertextuality is an inalienable property of every text and will continue to be one for texts yet to be created. It is a continuous thread always knitting different patterns in the literary world. It is probably as old as humanity is. *HoD* is yet another product of intertextuality. Besides all the knowledge from the texts the author had read in his life, the story is largely drawn upon his own personal experience in

the Congo in 1902. So the texts from his own life contribute to the intertextual mosaic. Ever since he was a child, the author wanted to go and see Africa. His wish came true at the time when although the Congo was nominally an independent state, the Congo Free State was virtually the personal property of Leopold II, king of the Belgians. Namely, through the connections with his distant cousin Marguerite Poradowska Conrad assumed a post as a Congo River pilot. The virtual exploitation and abuse exercised by the colonial powers greatly influenced Conrad. He was nonetheless shocked by all the brutalities and atrocities he had seen there. *Heart of Darkness* was the natural consequence of his lifetime experience. Conrad arrived in Africa in May 1890 and made his way up the Congo River very much as described in *Heart of Darkness*. Due to the fact that the steamer of which he was to be the captain had been damaged and was undergoing repairs, he was sent to Stanley Falls to collect and bring back to Kinshasa one Georges Antoine Klein (the original of Kurtz) who had fallen ill and died on board. Having fallen ill himself, Conrad eventually returned to London without actually working as a Congo River Pilot. He was both physically and mentally shattered.

*Apocalypse Now* is a paradigm of intertextuality. It can be characterized as the composition, a transposition of other texts, its creator had come across in his life, but generally it can be said that *Apocalypse Now* can be read as a cinematic illumination of the new meanings as transposed by *Heart of Darkness*. Both the book and the film share parallel characters, dialogues and central themes. The central points in both of the pieces is the “darkness” or the “Apocalypse” set in different circumstances but confidently immanent to human nature. Conrad first published his novella in 1898 at the time when imperialism was at its peak, which when transposed into Coppola's film becomes the time of the Vietnam War. The film's director transformed the African darkness in *Heart of Darkness* into a Cambodian one. The whole connection between the two pieces lies in the way how the text from *Heart of Darkness* has been transposed

into Coppola's film some eighty years later acquiring new meanings. Both the film and the book can be divided in three parts: the beginning of the journey, the journey up the river and the ultimate goal of the two protagonists, the meeting with the mysterious figure of Kurtz. On the surface, the story goes the same in the film as it does in the book. However, Captain Willard's story absorbs that of Marlow's giving it a different shape.

Captain Benjamin Willard and Mr. Chris Marlow are both nationals of great powers who embark on journey up a river into the forefront of a jungle. Marlow is on the "dark continent" at the heat of imperialism, while Willard is in the heart of the warfare in Vietnam. However similar the two characters may seem, there are some distinct differences between them. Marlow is an adventurous, introspective and self-reflexive man who embarks not only on a physical journey but also on mental one. Willard on the other hand is with the mind of a soldier, and his reflection on the whole surrounding differs much in this respect. From the very beginning we know that he is a killer and that his task is to kill the mad Colonel who declared himself god to the natives in the heart of the jungle. His task is to respond to the orders of the US Army, and that is to kill one of their men who got lost in the brutality, absurdity and the madness of the war. During their journey on their boats, the two counterparts experience life-changing situations. First of all, they find themselves in totally different surroundings from the ones they were used to. They are in the middle of a foreign land with foreign people. At first Marlow perceives the "darkness" African, but later it appears to be the darkness of the human soul. This particularly refers to the issues of colonialism, race, madness and the evil inherent in the human nature. This set of issues in *Heart of Darkness* is interwoven in *Apocalypse Now*, mainly through the main characters. The colonial powers hypocritically exploited their colonies. On the excuse of a "benevolent project of civilization" they were exploiting both the native people and the natural resources. Conrad portrays Marlow's

experience as a “choice of nightmares” – the horrific deeds of a man who had broken free from any moral or legal restraint. What Marlow encounters on his way from the Outer to the Inner and finally to the Central Station is utterly abominable. Torture, savagery, exploitation was what stood behind the colonial enterprise. The natives are completely suppressed and ostracized under constant violence and intimidation. The novel is exposure of the evil practice of Europe over Africa. To both Marlow and Kurtz, the Africans are just a piece of machinery and Kurtz’s African mistress mere statuary. The oppression of non-whites seems to be much more sinister than the violent treatment of the Company men. Conrad’s ivory traders are Coppola’s soldiers. Although the two groups are different in that the “ivory traders are there on their free will, while the soldiers are there sent on duty. Nevertheless, what reveals the dark side of the human soul is that they are both greedy, brutal and without any moral constraints.

### **Conclusion**

The film as a composition of intertextual references *focusing* on the texts from the book that are interwoven in the film generating new meanings. The notions from the book do not serve as the source for the film, but they were merely transposed in it. The film is regarded as a powerful masterpiece due to the new meaning acquired through this transposition.

## Abbreviations

HoD – *Heart of Darkness*

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